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Thank you for your assistance.
A contextual examination of reminiscence functions in older African-Americans

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Abstract

Reminiscence functions have been shown to be associated with positive mental health and well-being in certain older adult populations. However, there is little known regarding the functions of reminiscence in older African-Americans. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceived benefits and functions of reminiscence in a sample of community-dwelling older African-Americans. The purposive sample included African-American adults (N = 52) over the age of 60. Data were collected via focus groups and participant observations in senior centers and churches in an urban area in the Northeast. Participants’ descriptions of the benefits and functions of reminiscence and researchers’ journals were analyzed using immersion/crystallization technique as described by Borkan (1999). The following themes emerged from the data: 1) Something Like a Big Dictionary, 2) Moving On, 3) Fellowship, Faith and Family, 4) Teaching the Young and 5) A Brand New Knowledge of Ourselves. Using Webster’s taxonomy of Reminiscence Functions to compare and contrast data, results provide contextual support for the reminiscence functions of: Identity, Teach/Inform, Intimacy Maintenance, Problem Solving, and Conversation in this sample of older African-Americans. These participants viewed reminiscing for Boredom Reduction, Bitterness Revival, and Death Preparation as negative and “leads to depression”. These findings have implications for how reminiscence is facilitated with older African-American adults to improve their mental health and well-being. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

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ethnicty and reminiscence functions, the authors recommend studies be conducted to compare reminiscence functions between ethnic groups.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to describe older African-American adults’ perceptions of the functions and benefits of reminiscence and compare findings using Webster’s Taxonomy of Reminiscence Functions.

Theoretical framework

This program of reminiscence research is based on the Theory of Cognitive Adaptation (O'Rourke, 2002). According to this theory, the way that people review and interpret their personal relationships and life histories is significantly associated with wellness in later life. The key construct of the theory is “cognitive reconstruction”. Individuals are assisted to think differently about a phenomenon. Through reminiscence there is reconstruction of negative thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs. The strategies that promote reminiscence as an intervention to decrease minor depressive symptoms are: 1) identifying negative thinking and shifting to more positive thinking, 2) generating alternative thinking about the past (reframing thinking), 3) identifying coping strategies and 4) emphasizing competence (Cappeliez, 2007). There has been a strong link between integrative reminiscence and physical and mental well-being (Cappeliez & O'Rourke, 2006). For this program of research, it is hypothesized that facilitating the reminiscence process with an older adult by a supportive listener and validating the older adult’s life experiences, acknowledging past coping skills, and emphasizing accomplishments will assist the older adult to develop a sense of self-worth and attain ego-integrity through a positive recollection of experiences. This process decreases feelings of regret, despair, and other negative thoughts that emerge as depressive symptoms in day to day life activities. Therefore, understanding the function reminiscence serves for the individual is important for the reminiscence facilitator in order to encourage the older adult to interpret his or her experiences in a positive way. Results from this study provide important data regarding the functions and perceived benefits of reminiscence in an older African-American population so that appropriate reminiscence programs can be developed with this population to identify past coping strategies and reframe thinking in a positive way.

Reminiscence

Reminiscence is a naturally occurring process in which one recalls past experiences. This process occurs across the life span, may be spontaneous or facilitated by an active listener, and may occur in isolation or in the company of others (Butler, 1963; Westerhof et al., 2010). Reminiscence scholars have demonstrated that this process comes in many forms. For example, reminiscence has been grouped into as few as two types (Romaniuk & Romanuik, 1981) and as many as six types (Watt & Wong, 1991; Webster, 1993). Romaniuk and Romaniuk (1981) grouped reminiscence as intrapersonal and interpersonal. Intrapersonal, was described as a private process and more evaluative in nature while interpersonal reminiscence was identified as conversational and a social process. Watt and Wong (1991) identified a taxonomy of reminiscence that included six different types. Their taxonomy includes: 1) integrative reminiscence when there is acceptance of self and others and integration of the past and present; 2) instrumental reminiscence, defined as drawing from past experiences to solve present day problems; 3) transmissive reminiscence, similar to storytelling and oral history when there is a sharing of personal wisdom from one generation to another; 4) escapist reminiscence, referred to as defensive reminiscence occurs when one seeks comfort from people and events; 5) obsessive reminiscence, characterized by persistent rumination of unpleasant events often accompanied by feelings of guilt, shame and resentment; and 6) narrative reminiscence, having more of a descriptive nature, consisting of the recounting of past events without interpretation or evaluation. The development of this taxonomy has led to work on the specific functions of reminiscence in order to understand the therapeutic effects that clinicians observe as they facilitate reminiscence with older adults, and to improve outcome studies.

Reminiscence functions

Webster developed and tested the Reminiscence Functions Scale (RFS) that allows for the measurement of eight functions of reminiscence identified as: 1) identity problem-solving, 2) teaching/informing, 3) conversing, 4) boredom reduction, 5) bitterness revival, 6) death preparation, 7) intimacy maintenance and 8) problem solving (1993;1997). The RFS, a 43-item scale, is designed to measure all of the stated reminiscence functions across the life span. The RFS scale has consistently been shown to be reliable and valid (Robitaille, Cappeliez, Coulombe, & Webster, 2010; Webster, 1993, 1997, 2003) and has been utilized to demonstrate associations between reminiscence functions and mental health and well-being (Cappeliez & O'Rourke, 2002, 2006). Although results confirmed the RFS as reliable and valid for conducting research with older adults, there are limits to the generalizability of its use with different ethnic groups because studies were mostly conducted with Canadian and American Caucasian populations.

Research has shown that experiences of discrimination, prejudice, and poverty cause African-American older adults to suffer more psychological distress than whites, yet African-Americans are more likely to be under-diagnosed and undertreated for depression than other ethnic groups (Das, Olsson, McCurtis, & Weissman, 2006). These findings in addition to the limited reminiscence research conducted with older African-Americans, warrant the exploration of why and when older African-Americans think about the past to examine the data for similarities and differences in the reminiscence functions as described by Webster (1993, 1997).

For the purpose of this study, reminiscence is defined as the recollection of memories. The following research aims guided the study:

1) To explore the perceived benefits and functions of reminiscence in a sample of community-dwelling older African-Americans from the Northeast.
2) To compare and contrast contextual findings with Webster's taxonomy of Reminiscence Functions.
Methods

Research design

A descriptive study design using focus group methodology was employed to determine participants’ perceptions of the benefits and functions of reminiscence.

Procedure

Approval for the study was obtained from the university’s internal review board. African-American research assistants were trained to conduct culturally sensitive interviews, and participated in the protection of human subjects training required by the university. An African-American research assistant was selected to collect the data because shared group membership has been described as a way of facilitating discussion and disclosure of sensitive topics (Jackson, 1991) and inclusion of researchers who belong to the ethnic group under study has the potential to reduce the threats to a valid research process (Porter & Villarruel, 1993). The research assistant read the consent form to each participant. Once the participant's understanding of the study was confirmed by the research assistant, the consent form was signed before data collection began. Inclusion criteria for participation in the study included: 1) being African-American born in the United States, 2) 60 years of age and older, and 3) community dwelling. In this study African-American is defined as persons having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa including Caribbean Blacks. Eight focus groups (N = 52) were conducted until data saturation was reached. Participants were provided a $25.00 gift card as a thank you for their time and expertise.

Focus group procedure

A focus group guide was developed by the PI for the facilitator and then piloted with two African-American older adults. No changes were necessary. Content of the facilitator guide included study information, a procedure for introductions, directions for conducting the focus groups, and the open-ended questions. The same guide was used for each focus group. The focus groups were audio-taped and timed, and the facilitator took notes of his observations during the time the participants completed the survey. A separate room was secured by the PI or RA at the senior center or church to ensure privacy during the focus group sessions.

The demographic form was completed first by the participants, followed by introductions and an ice-breaker question. The focus group sessions explored the participants’ perceptions of reminiscence. To better understand African-Americans’ perceptions toward the functions of reminiscence, the participants were asked open-ended questions as part of the inquiry: 1) Describe for me in detail one of your most positive memories, 2) Describe when you find yourself thinking about the past more often than at other times, 3) What does reminiscence mean to you, 4) What are the benefits of thinking about your past?

The open-ended questions were developed by the investigator based on the research questions under investigation.

Sample and setting

This study took place in two senior communities in an urban center located in the northeast section of the United States. Two churches and two senior centers whose participants are African-American and Caribbean Black composed the participants in this study. In qualitative research, participants are selected to maximize appropriate information relevant to the research question (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). For this study, the sample was purposively selected to obtain rich information regarding community-dwelling older African Americans’ perceptions about the benefits and functions of reminiscence. Sixty percent of the participants in this study reported that they were born in the South with all others citing an urban city in the Northeast as their birthplace, the mean age of the sample was 72 (SD = 6.9), 90% of the sample were female and 38% reported that they had graduated from high school.

Data collection

The focus groups were conducted by the African-American research assistant who was trained by the PI. Data saturation was reached after six focus groups were conducted. Group size ranged from four to eight participants. Demographic information was collected using a PI developed form. All focus groups were digitally audio-taped. Additionally, the focus group facilitator took notes during the sessions. Debriefing sessions were held after each focus group to review the process. This iterative process enabled the researchers to address potential issues before the next group was conducted.

Data analysis

Demographic characteristics and descriptive data were analyzed using SPSS 17. The PI and research assistant (RA) communicated weekly to discuss study progress. Continual analysis of the data occurred during these debriefing sessions as new data were discussed and reflected upon. For example, contextual data from reflective journals, audio tapes, and key informant interviews were analyzed using the immersion/crystallization (IC) technique described by Borkan (1999). This interpretive technique is intuitive, more engaged, and more fluid during all stages of the research process from planning of the research study to the description of results.

The steps to this analysis process are: 1) initial engagement with the topic, 2) crystallization, 3) immersion and illumination from collected data and texts, 4) explication and synthesis, 5) consideration of alternative interpretations and 6) reporting the account. Analysis is constant, and reflective, and there is a repeated delving into and experiencing of the data throughout the study (Borkan, 1999). This analysis was selected because IC occurs before data collection, during the study design and planning, during and after data collection, and as the write-up or reporting is completed and appropriately fit with the specific aims of this study. Table 1 provides an example of the development of the theme of Moving On. Although Moving On represents the participants’ thoughts about the importance of not dwelling on painful experiences, it was the repeated reviewing of data and immersion that enlightened the researcher to understand the power of the painful memories.
Despite attempts to push these experiences aside, the stories of discrimination and abuse emerged time after time.

Qualitative rigor

According to Guba and Lincoln (1985), qualitative rigor emerges from credibility, auditability, and fitmentness. Credibility or trustworthiness of the data was insured by training research assistants, periodic debriefing session, and prolonged engagement with the data. During training sessions, the research assistant was asked to share his beliefs about the functions of reminiscence in older African-Americans so he could set potential biases aside. These discussions allowed for clear documentation of the participants’ beliefs about reminiscence. Prolonged engagement or spending time within the culture allows for trust to develop and adds depth to the overall understanding of the subject. The research assistant spent time at the sites, participating in various activities with the senior center nurse and directors, and conducting participant observations. Auditability or ability of another investigator to follow the decision trail of the researcher from the beginning of data analysis to the end was achieved as an experienced researcher not involved in the study was asked to review the decision trail from highlighting meaningful segments to data synthesis and development of the themes. Fittingness refers to the transferability of the findings to others. Fittingness of the study was addressed by seeking out older African-Americans in senior centers and churches who were willing to provide their thoughts about reminiscence. It is important to be mindful that results from this study reflect the beliefs of this particular group of community-dwelling older African-Americans born and living in the United States. Other sub-groups within the African-American population may have different views regarding reminiscence.

Results

The research aim to explore community-dwelling older African-Americans’ perceived benefits and functions of reminiscence in community-dwelling older African-Americans from the Northeast was answered using open-ended questions. Analysis of the contextual data resulted in the following themes: 1) Something Like a Big Dictionary, 2) Moving On, 3) Fellowship, Faith and Family, 4) Teaching Others and 5) A Brand New Knowledge of Ourselves. The following are descriptions of the major themes that emerged from the contextual data.

Thèmes are represented by participant quotes.

When I think about the past it’s been very, very constant for me. And it’s something like a big dictionary to look back on to help me raise my kids, grandkids and solve any problems. I really do use my past for mistakes I made, how I’ve lost and how I’ve gained. And I think it’s a blessing to have that.

Moving on

While the participants acknowledged their collection of experiences were positive and negative, it was clear that it is important for them not to dwell on the more negative memories. The theme, Moving On, emerged as the participants reviewed the items pertaining to reminiscence functions of bitterness revival and death. For example, when asked to respond to the item “I reminisce to keep painful memories alive”, one participant stated the following:

I wouldn’t dare reminisce to keep painful memories alive. It takes too much energy to remember when someone did this or that.....it’s wasted energy. I say, okay this happened, you say what you want to say and then you move on.

Many of the participants supported this theme with statements such as, “I put the past behind me, I might think..."
about those times, but then it’s gone,” and “you can’t help but think about those times, but just don’t dwell.”

A significant pattern associated with Moving On was the participants’ thoughts regarding reminiscing to prepare for death. Statements such as “no one thinks about dying, we think about living,” “thinking about the past to prepare for death makes me depressed,” and “if thoughts of death come into my head, I don’t dwell, I move on.”

Although the participants repeatedly stated they would never purposely think about the past to revive older hurts or keep painful memories alive, stories of discrimination and spousal abuse emerged frequently without the facilitator specifically asking about these painful memories. For example, the question asking the participants to describe in detail one of their most positive memories brought up the following:

Well, um, it’s supposed to be positive because it has to deal with civil rights, but I grew up in Baltimore and it was really segregated. I was the first student to go to a white school and I was really happy about that, but then I got off the bus …… it was just so many people out there with signs, you know. “Send the niggers back to Africa”, “We don’t want you.” Real hurtful things and it scared me to death. It was one of the worse times of my life, felt so low, you know, they really messed up my self esteem and I’m telling you it was not a good time for us.

Fellowship, family, and faith

The strong fellowship between the participants was evidenced in their statements of support for one another during each focus group session. Throughout the transcripts, statements from participants such as “yes”, “that’s me, too,” “Amen,” “that was beautiful,” after someone’s story or recollection of a particular experience. The experiences most meaningful and positive to the participants were the memories of family. This participant recalled a positive memory about her grandfather:

“I loved walking behind my grandfather, never beside him, never holding his hands but it was a joy to walk behind him. Maybe looking back it was just following in his footsteps. I loved working with him in the garden—that was the greatest time of all.” Another participant recalls family reunions and the happiness the memories bring: “Happy times are our family reunions and the videos we made. I just sit and watch day after day and laugh; and then the baby pictures that come across or all the members that join the family. So, you know, you see a lot of the people that are no longer with us, but it still brings back the happiness, the happy, happy times.”

The importance and strength of faith of the participants was strongly evident throughout the data. For example, “when I think about the dealings of the Lord, what he has done for me, I just get excited.” During introductions at the start of the focus groups, most were reflective about their faith with comments such as, “I couldn’t have made it without my Jesus,” “I put God in my life, and things are going good,” and “when I think about the past, I think about the things of the Lord and how I can stay saved.”

Teaching the young

One of the most important reminiscence functions for this sample that emerged from the data was teaching and informing the younger generation. Comments such as “the family history, they need to know that,” and “we have strong roots and I want to pass that on.” Thinking about the past and talking to younger family members about what they learned from these experiences is illustrated in the following participant quote:

Even though we raised our grandchildren, we still raising our grandchildren because they don’t have the moral values that they should have. You know it’s so good that we are our age and we know what the good values are because these children don’t know what we know and we steadily say to them, “you got to do better”. But, they want to know why. See, we already know why and we pass it on.

A brand new knowledge of ourselves

At the end of the sessions, the participants commented on how much they enjoyed reminiscing and, in some cases, the focus group experience seemed to change their minds about reminiscing:

“This was so different than I thought it would be. When I first came in here I said he is going to start talking and asking me a bunch of stupid questions. I was wrong. Now, I have a whole new knowledge about myself with reminiscing.”

While this theme of a brand new knowledge emerged frequently, there were strong feelings among the participants that people should ask them more often about their past. This is evidenced by the following participant quote:

“If we didn’t think anything of ourselves before, we do now. We’re walking out of here with a brand new knowledge of ourselves. We are very special people, this age group, we are very special. If people would only realize what we know…our past history… maybe they would come and say “well, what do you know about things of the past?”

Discussion and implications

This is the first known study to explore community-dwelling older African-Americans’ perceptions of the functions and benefits of reminiscence. Themes that emerged from the data provide valuable information for health care providers and researchers in the way that African-American older adults review their experiences and for what functions. This information, however, is only the first step to better understanding the complexities of reminiscence functions in older African-Americans.
Results from this study suggest that there are differences in the functions of reminiscence in older African-Americans when compared to Webster’s Taxonomy of Reminiscence. Functions derived from an all-white sample which has implications for: 1) how reminiscence is facilitated with this population for mental health and well-being, 2) reminiscence program development, and 3) future reminiscence research with different ethnic groups. Using Webster’s taxonomy of Reminiscence Functions to compare and contrast the contextual data, the themes presented in this paper provide insight into the functions of reminiscence and what that means to this sample. According to the participants, reminiscence is perceived as a collection of both positive and negative memories they can look back on and use to cope with present problems, to teach younger generations, and to learn about themselves. Additionally, reminiscing about family, faith, and fellowship brings them much happiness and joy, while reminiscing about negative experiences, to reduce boredom, or prepare for death is to be avoided.

The first theme, Something Like a Big Dictionary, supports the reminiscence function of problem solving as described by Webster (1993, 1997). The reminiscence function of problem solving is defined as reminiscing to look back at past problem solving strategies to solve current problems. Participants described difficult times such as spousal abuse, illness, discrimination, and death of a child, and how they “made it thorough” these experiences. According to this sample, recalling these experiences assists them to deal with current everyday problems.

The second theme “Moving On”, illuminates the participants’ thoughts on the benefit to avoiding reminiscing for death preparation or bitterness revival. Death preparation, according to Webster’s taxonomy (1993, 1997) is reminiscing to lessen anxiety about death and develop a sense of wholeness as one approaches the end of life. While this function is viewed as a positive function by reminiscence researchers, it is important to note that the participants viewed reminiscing for death preparation as a negative process which could lead to depression. The reminiscence function of Bitterness Revival refers to reviewing memories of experiences of being treated unfairly. Considering the history of discrimination this generation has experienced, it is understandable that the focus of their reminiscences would be on positive memories. For example, Ruggiero and Taylor (1997) suggested minimizing experiences of discrimination as a protective mechanism resulting in higher self-esteem and sense of control for the oppressed group, while Taylor (2001) suggested that African-Americans learned to ignore negative experiences and didn’t talk about them as a coping strategy. However, it should be noted that while participants reported they thought about happy memories only, stories of discrimination and abuse were shared without the participants being asked to describe their negative experiences.

These findings are similar to work conducted by Shellman (2004) in which older African-Americans reminisced about their experiences of discrimination without being asked. Results from these studies speak to the impact that years of discrimination have on the lives of the participants and have implications for their mental health and well-being. For example, in a literature review of empirical research on perceived discrimination and health conducted by Williams and Mohammed (2009), an inverse relationship was found between perceived discrimination and mental health outcomes. Jang, Chiriboga, and Small (2008) suggest that for individuals suffering from psychosocial consequences of discriminatory experiences interventions should be conducted that increase personal control, increase self-esteem, and self-worth. Using the Theory of Cognitive Adaptation (O’Rourke, 2002) as a model, integrative reminiscence is a useful intervention for preventing and reducing poorer mental health outcomes. For example, a trained facilitator would assist the older adult to identify and talk about the discrimination experiences, point out positive coping strategies to reframe thinking in a more positive way so the older adult becomes aware of his or her strengths and begins to feel an increase in self-worth and self-esteem.

The most positive memories for this sample included stories about their fellowship, families, and faith. Strengthening family ties, and cultivating faith and fellowship reveal the strengths of this population which served as survival strategies while growing up under harsh circumstances (Eyerman, 2001; Liberato, Fennell, & Jeffries, 2008). The fellowship among the participants was observed through body language and was evident in their supportive comments of one another in the transcripts. This finding supports previous work by Shellman & Mokel, 2009) in which peer support was noted during health education sessions conducted as a usual care group in a 581 reminiscence intervention study. Recalling positive memories of family and faith corresponds with the reminiscence functions of conversation, suggesting a social and positive function of reminiscence for this population. In this study, participants spoke fondly of family members who had passed away, suggesting that reminiscing for intimacy maintenance is a 588 positive function of reminiscence for this sample. This finding differs from the model of reminiscence functions and mental health (Cappeliez & O’Rourke, 2006; Cappeliez et al., 2005) in which reminiscence for intimacy maintenance is associated with negative emotions or possibly depressive symptoms. It is 592 important to note the sample from those studies included 412 older adults, 90% living in Australia or New Zealand suggesting that the sample significantly differed from the population participating in the current study. Further examination of the frequency of reminiscence for intimacy maintenance is needed to clarify whether this is a positive or negative function for 598 the African-American population.

The theme Teaching the Young provides contextual support to the reminiscence function of Teach and Inform which measures the way recalling the past is used to share important life lessons (Webster, 1997). The participants spoke frequently of the need to teach the younger generation about what they went through and how they survived and is reflected in their comments, “we are strong,” and “they need to know our strong roots and morals.” This finding describing the importance of sharing coping strategies with children is supported by Liberato et al. (2008) who interviewed older African-American women about their lived experiences during segregation. The theme Teaching the Young has implications for the development of intergenerational programs to promote this reminiscence function in older adults and educating the younger generation.

The last theme, A Brand New Knowledge About Ourselves, refers to the function of Identity as described by Webster (1993, 1997). Reminiscing for identity means using...
experiences to find worth and meaning in the life one has lived. This theme appeared most often at the end of the transcripts when the facilitator was closing the session. The participants reflected and commented on what reminiscing did for them during the focus groups. This finding supports reminiscence work by Shellman (2004) and Shellman and Mokel (2009) conducted with older African-Americans demonstrating that reminiscence does have benefits for this population such as acknowledging coping mechanisms and decreasing depressive symptoms.

These findings have implications for health care professionals conducting reminiscence with older African-Americans. According to the Theory of Cognitive Adaptation (O’Rourke, 2002), the way people think about the past is associated with mental health and well-being. Allowing older African-Americans to verbalize and process their negative experiences is an important first step to assist them to think differently about their memories. The next steps; identifying coping strategies with them, focusing on their strengths, and facilitating memories about family, faith and fellowship will enable the reminiscer to reframe their thinking and gain a brand new knowledge about themselves leading to positive mental health and well-being.

Conclusions and future research

This study is the first step in understanding reminiscence functions in older African-Americans. Using Webster’s taxonomy of Reminiscence Functions, results provide contextual support for the reminiscence functions of: Identity, Teach/Inform, Intimacy Maintenance, Problem Solving and Conversation in this sample of older African-Americans. These participants viewed reminiscing for Boredom Reduction, Bitterness Revival, and Death Preparation as negative and “leads to depression”. Despite comments, “we reminisce for happy times only and forget the bad ones”, stories of discrimination and abuse emerged in the data.

The next step towards better understanding reminiscence functions in older African-Americans is to determine the frequency with which this population reminisces with these specific reminiscence functions in mind. This research project, which is currently underway, will also examine the underlying constructs of the Modified Reminiscence Functions Scale and determine whether the data supports the existing factors of the scale. These data will provide the groundwork for researchers to then examine associations of reminiscence functions with mental health and well-being of older African-Americans. This area of reminiscence research, which has been virtually ignored, is essential in promoting the mental health and well-being of this population.

Uncited references

Brown, 1999
Haight and Webster, 1995
Shellman et al., 2007

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References


